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ABSTRACT

Current challenges to the more traditional orientations of higher education are apparent in the debate between educators who seek to broaden the student's perspective and develop scholarship and students who seek to find the relevance of their course material to their current perspective. This debate is similar to problems encountered within business organizations which are faced with the need to cope with rapid change. The present paper examines this issue and recommends both a method for easing the pressures involved and testing the effectiveness of such treatments. (Author)

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ON STRUCTURING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE TO BE RESPONSIVE TO STUDENTS: ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE CLASSROOM*

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On Structuring the Educational Experience to be Responsive to Students: Organization Development in the Classroom

Current challenges to the more traditional orientations of higher education are apparent in the debate between educators who seek to broaden the student's perspective and develop scholarship and students who seek to find the relevance of their course material to their current perspective. This debate is similar to problems encountered within business organizations which are faced with the need to cope with rapid change. The present paper examines this issue and recommends both a method for easing the pressures involved and testing the effectiveness of such treatments.

The Relevancy/Professionalism Debate

The issue of course "relevance" is an old and common topic for debate among academic circles. At their extreme, positions can be stereotyped as having two ends with students desiring increased "relevance" of course work for their day-to-day activities while faculty members embrace "professional" objectives designed to provide students with a greater degree of conceptual understanding. Underpinning this debate are two distinct philosophies (summarized by Liebert & Bayer, 1975).

The traditional academic perspective is traced to the work of Veblen (1918) who held that the purpose of higher education was "to equip the student for the work of inquiry, not to give him [sic] facility in that conduct of affairs that turns such knowledge to practical account" (Veblen, 1957; p. 12). In other words, higher education should focus on developing scholars. And as recently as 1964, Gross

and Gambsch (1968) observed that faculty members perceived professional goals to be foremost in importance among institutional objectives. Largely opposing this view, though, is that of Clark Kerr (1964) who noted that academic institutions were turning more and more toward attempts to give students more relevant and immediately applicable course work. Through their own study of 42,345 faculty at a wide variety of academic institutions, Liebert and Bayer (1975) concluded that Kerr's hypothesis was being confirmed among senior college faculty taken as a whole. Even in some highly professionalized fields such as sociology and political science, the future trend toward increased relevancy was clear. Viewing the students' role as that of client, seven inter-related reasons for this movement were given (Liebert & Bayer, 1975, pp. 203-4):

1. Campus unrest during the 1960's gave a strong impetus to general questioning of academic "disengagement from civic affairs;"

2. There is currently a growing concern over "how to get more vocational utility out of a college education in the face of a highly competitive "oversupply of graduates;"

3. "High rates of professional reproduction have glutted the traditional target market of higher education;"

4. "Social sciences, and especially sociology, have an unusually broad potential relevance to client concerns;"

5. "There are a number of newly developing and growing non-academic occupational opportunities for social science graduates "thereby narrowing the social distance between the teaching professional and a sector of the client's non-academic world;"

6. Development of "special niches in government for the employment of persons trained in the analytical skills" of academic disciplines has begun; and

7. "Institutional policy makers" are placing "mounting emphasis on accountability to clients."

At the same time, however, Liebert and Bayer's findings also made it clear that academicians were not abandoning traditional perspectives. In each of the subsamples, drawn from sociology, political science, economics and psychology, as well as in their sample taken as a whole, Liebert and Bayer observed that at least the top four goals of higher education, as ranked by faculty, were professional in nature. In all cases, the goal receiving the most emphasis was "to develop the ability to undertake self-directed learning" and "to master knowledge in a discipline" alternating for second and third place. All of these are professional rather than relevancy oriented goals. An obvious conclusion of this research is that faculty members are faced with strong pressures to systematically combine the two philosophies--relevancy and professionalism--into a single new teaching format "in which the conduct of college teaching is shaped no more by professional considerations than by client [relevancy] considerations" (Liebert & Bayer, 1975, p. 203). Therefore, it appears that some choices need to be made and those choices must necessarily hinge upon the ability of an instructor to be responsive to students.

Operationalizing Responsiveness in Education

Finding a way to define and ultimately operationalize responsiveness, however, can be a difficult endeavor. For some time now, certain organizational behaviorists have recognized the importance of client-centeredness in business organizations. But as noted by Fox, Pate, and Pondy (1976), "the definition of 'responsiveness to clients' is a mine field of ambiguities." Specifically, in the organizational setting, there are at least two problems involved in becoming more responsive to one's

clients (Fox et al., 1976, pp. 55-57):

1. In most organizations, "it is by no means clear who the client is." Rosengren and Lefton (1970) consider clients to be outside of the organization. Meanwhile Hall (1972) and Starbuck (1975) contend that the boundaries of an organization may be difficult to define. For instance "if we define client to mean those whose legitimate interests are intended to be served by the organization," it is "not even obvious that the [prime] clients of a school system are the students," and indeed this may not be the case.

2. "Even if the organization can determine who its clients are," "there is no assurance that even the client knows what his [sic] needs truly are." Certainly many faculty members and former students would agree that they did not perceive some information they were taught to be relevant until quite some time after it was first taught.

However, the "client" notion may be cumbersome in academic organizations since it could conceivably include faculty themselves, administrators, governing boards, state legislatures, taxpayers and a host of other non-student individuals who manage to benefit from the organization. Instead of including all possible interest groups as clients, the present paper is interested in responsiveness to the extent that the educational system is able to adapt to and incorporate student relevancy considerations. This focus on students as clients effectively limits both of the problems cited above and places attention on the student's perceptions of relevancy, rather than on determining what his or her "true" needs actually may be. In other words, responsiveness "suggests a reaction, a capacity to both adapt and anticipate" student perceptions of class relevancy (Fox et al., 1976, p. 57). This definition of responsiveness still leaves us some distance from a workable operationalization, however, since we have not yet specified where the educational system can become responsive, nor how this might be done.

Certainly, the classroom provides the traditional focal point for

interaction between students and faculty members. It is in class that both are theoretically free from the outside influences of other parts of the academic system and it is logical to expect that the choices between relevancy and professionalism must be carried out.

Focusing on the classroom, however, necessitates a confrontation between the classic function of a classroom and a desire to be responsive to students. Historically, the classroom provides the major channel through which information regarding course content, behavioral norms, educational perspectives and other professional objectives has been systematically transmitted to students. The classroom has not, however, been commonly used for the reverse process of systematically transmitting student perceptions of course relevancy to instructors. Perhaps, this distinction can be more clearly recognized when one considers the kinds of frequently used measures of classroom education effectiveness in higher education settings. Generally, these measures fall into two classes, those that examine the degree to which students have attained professional objectives such as mastery of material and the ability to think clearly and, on the other hand, post hoc course and instructor evaluations. The former do little to directly assess class relevancy; the latter often ask questions about relevancy issues, but are severly limited by their post hoc nature. Most course evaluation questionnaires consist of unvalidated instruments which vaguely determine student objectives, and at best yield information enabling an instructor to adapt a future course to a set of past students. The void which is left is central to the issue of course relevancy; specifically, how can a given course be adapted to meet the specific needs of the students enrolled in it?

Researchers in non-academic organizations have noted this problem, too. Most business organizations tend to rely on a one-way communication strategy in which the processes of getting clients to form intentions, learn new behavior patterns, and evoke new behaviors are "initiated from top down." "While one-way designs may sometimes be aimed at increasing responsiveness, . . . their capacity for doing so is limited. Since client needs cannot be anticipated fully [sic] in advance, a one-way causal strategy of design simply will not work." On the other hand, a two-way communication strategy in which "the signals for learning, formation of intentions, and evocation of behavior patterns would come from the client's themselves," would inherently provide for greater client input and increased organizational responsiveness (Fox, et al., 1976, p. 68).

In academic settings, our feeling is that instructors need to systematically develop two-way communication channels to specifically cope with the pressures caused by the relevancy/professionalism issue.

Organization Development As A Two-Way Strategy

If one desires to develop a two-way classroom communication pattern, however, he or she is likely to be faced with a series of problems ranging from outright rejection of the new approach by students preconditioned to not participating, through conflict between student and professional goals. What is needed, then, is a systematic method by which the instructor and his or her class can cope with the changes required to increase responsiveness.

While somewhat unique to educational settings, this issue is a common one in organizational behavior. It is not unusual for organizations to decide that they need to effect changes in their method of

operation. Likewise, it is common for people who comprise those organizations to resist such change. The situation in higher education organizations is really much the same.

Business organizations have been using a variety of techniques for coping with change, commonly called organization development (OD), for years. Having its earliest origins in the familiar Hawthorne studies at Western Electric (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939), OD has undergone a number of modifications over the years. Typically, OD no longer refers to the sensitivity or t-group training conceptualized by Kurt Lewin and popularized by the National Training Laboratory (NTL) beginning in 1947 (cf. Bradford, Gibb and Benne, 1964). Instead, OD now refers to any of a set of inter-related programs and activities, often under the direction of a "change agent" and based on behavioral science, which are used to facilitate organizational goal attainment under conditions of change (Argyris, 1970, 1971; Argyris & Schön, 1974; Beer, 1976; Bennis, 1969; Margulies & Raia, 1972).

In general, these methods can be dichotomized into two categories--those that focus on goal definition and those that are concerned instead with the process of goal attainment. Each of these methods could be used to increase academic responsiveness to students in higher education, based on their humanistic origins.

The first category of OD is typified by the management by objectives (MBO) approach. As applied to a classroom situation, MBO could be accomplished by using the first class period to have students and the instructor, who could function as a change agent, define the goals (professional and relevancy) related to the course. Each student would then be made responsible for setting forth individual objectives within the

class objectives and identifying the criteria on which he or she desires to be evaluated. A review of MBO (Luthans, 1977) noted that the effectiveness of this method relies upon well tested facets which lead to better goal attainment. These facets include goal setting, feedback on performance, and open two-way participation (Bryan & Locke, 1967; Hamner & Ringel, 1965; Locke, 1968; Locke & Bryan, 1967; Zajonce, 1961).

An alternative process-oriented approach, which is also in widespread use today in business organizations, is that of team-building. This method, as applied to classroom settings would have students participate in exercises designed to build cohesion on the first day. Student attitudes toward the course content, instructor and classroom environment would then be assessed early in the semester so that around the midterm students would be able to evaluate their degree of perceived goal attainment. One or two class periods would then be set aside for students and instructor, again acting as change agent, to identify and correct barriers that exist in their goal attainment (cf. Nielsen & Kimberly, 1976). Like MBO, this approach is founded in the researched notion that open two-way participation is an effective boost to goal attainment (Friedlander, 1967; Kimberly & Nielsen, 1975).

When compared to the post hoc methods in common use today, each of these methods would appear to offer distinct advantages to the students currently enrolled in the course, by establishing immediate two-way communication channels and providing both instructor and student a mechanism for coping with change. Additionally, they would further operationalize the responsiveness concept and thereby allow greater, systematic integration of relevancy/professionalism goals. More complete discussions of each of these methods, albeit in organizational, not

academic, settings can be found in Beckhard (1969), French and Bell (1973), Margulies and Wallace (1973), and Schein and Bennis (1965). A review of literature pertaining to OD can be found in Pate (1976).

Limitations on OD in Classroom Settings

Although OD, in theory, is both applicable and useful in educational settings (cf. Alschuler, 1972; Schmuck & Miles, 1971), its application is also subject to several potential problems which should be considered. Perhaps the most obvious is that any additional class activity, including OD, places additional time demands on an already overcrowded class syllabus. It is our contention, however, that this limitation should be tempered by at least two other factors. First, when one accepts the Liebert and Bayer (1975) conclusion that the amount of emphasis on student relevancy considerations is increasing, one is implicitly accepting that some priority shifts will have to be made in class activity. OD would seem to offer a genuine and systematic, but time conserving method of attaining this change. Secondly, while OD can be quite time consuming in large business organizations (Carroll & Tosi, 1973; Nielsen & Kimberly, 1976), its application along the lines suggested here could be accomplished in relatively few class periods.

A more serious problem concerning the use of OD is that although OD attempts to make accomplishments which have been shown to improve goal attainment, (e.g., goal setting, performance feedback, two-way participation), very few attempts to empirically assess the direct impact of OD itself have been made. In part this is because the rapid application of OD has led to a tendency for research and practice to develop unevenly, until the proliferation of OD techniques has expanded

well beyond available theory (Huse, 1975). Nevertheless, even though some evidence exists that OD research is on the rise (Friedlander & Brown, 1974), very few experimental or quasi-experimental research efforts have been reported in the OD literature (Pate, 1977; Pate, Nielsen & Mowday, 1977). As a result, "it remains unclear what mechanisms operate in successful team development activities, or what critical conditions must be satisfied . . . or what effects group development has on actual task performance" (Friedlander & Brown, 1974, p. 329). On the other hand, OD has been shown to significantly affect individual perceptions of the task at hand (Friedlander, 1967). Since class relevancy is primarily a student perception, on balance and in spite of the limited research, we believe OD should have beneficial effects in educational settings. This research gap, however, is serious and must be filled.

There are also several problems facing academic use of OD methods which are more unique to the classroom situation. These are summarized as follows:

1. Many faculty members have less control over the activities in their classes than is needed to allow OD sufficient flexibility to work. Since a fundamental assumption of OD is that change is possible, it would be less than effective in situations where this is not the case. For example, OD would probably not work well in sections of a large survey course where the instructor is not the course director and is highly directed in her or his activity.

2. There are usually several constraints on classes which are beyond the students' and instructor's complete control. Examples of this might include textbook choice, class size, semester length, and student mix. OD efforts could be constrained if it appeared that any of these unchangeable factors were barriers to effective goal attainment. Of course, through use of OD methods it would at least be possible to identify these factors as problem areas.

3. The instructor may be unwilling or unable to accept the role of change agent since it implies an independence that may not be possible in classes where students perceive the

instructor to be part of the problem. Also, some instructors might feel compromised by the need to allow students to openly challenge course content. In either of these cases, an effort should be made to find an independent third-party (this could be a graduate student) to play the role of change agent.

4. Class member expectations will typically be that they are the recipient, not the source of information. Many students have been preconditioned to expect to be told what to do and may well resent efforts to alter their role. The brief time allowed OD in any given class may be insufficient to cope with this situation, however, this is not an insurmountable problem. Generally, it seems that this is more of a problem in large classes than smaller sections and OD is capable of coping with this, too, although it may take some additional class exercises.

An Experimental Test of OD in the Classroom[1]

As reported above, OD research has tended to be extremely limited in scope and impact. In fact, few studies have ever attempted to test the effects of the overall OD intervention. Instead researchers have generally focused upon certain aspects of the intended impact of OD efforts and practitioners have ignored the problem. In order for OD to become useful and adapted to academic settings, however, future research efforts must be directed toward overall tests of OD effectiveness and specifically toward answering two key issues noted by Friedlander and Brown (1974):

1. determine the actual mechanisms in OD which produce results, and;
2. determine the critical conditions which must be satisfied for effective OD interventions.

Friedlander and Brown's third issue of determining the effects of group development on actual task performance may be less valuable in academic settings than assuring that group development leads to increased student

input and ultimately greater class responsiveness.

With these goals in mind, then, the application of OD methods in the classroom lends itself to an opportunity to provide the OD field with a much needed laboratory test of OD effectiveness. This section presents a suggested research design which tests the differential effects of OD interventions.

Given an ability to involve sufficient numbers of students, it would be possible to treat the classroom in which OD will be attempted as a laboratory setting consisting of student groups assigned to complete a common task during the semester. In fact, this task could be little more than a semester project or even objective tests, so long as it is administered uniformly to all students involved.

Independent Variables

Initially, there would appear to be two important independent variables, one concerning the kind of OD practiced and the other focusing on the elapsed time of the intervention. Since MBO tends to focus on "outcomes" and consists of efforts to clarify group goals, establish priorities and set useful evaluation criteria, it could be considered as one level of an OD treatment in the research. MBO treatment groups would meet with a MBO facilitator and engage in MBO activities.

Similarly, since team building attempts to analyze the "process" by which goals are set and attained and it concentrates on improving co-worker relationships, building group cohesion and reducing conflict, it could be treated as a second intervention level. These groups would also meet with an outside facilitator, but would concentrate on team building and process activities.

These groups are not sufficient, however, since at least two rival

hypotheses could still explain changes in dependent measures (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). The first, that any change in normal class activities changes student perceptions and behavior, could be tested through use of a placebo group. This placebo should probably consist of a mere change in class activity, such as increase group discussion of a non-directed nature with an outside facilitator. For example, the facilitator could simply review the instructor's lecture without setting forth on any specific OD intervention. A second rival hypothesis, that changes in student perceptions and behavior are independent of any change in class activity, could be tested through incorporation of a control group which consists of no effort by the instructor to systematically cope with demands for increased relevancy nor any assistance from an outside facilitator. In summary, then, one independent variable could consist of intervention type and have four levels: MBO, team building, placebo and control. By crossing facilitators with each intervention type, their differential effect would also be controlled.

A separate consideration would be that student perceptions may change over time in linear or non-linear trends. This is in part due to the literature indicating that a differential time lag may result between an intervention and its ultimate effect (Likert, 1967). Stated as a hypothesis this could be tested by measuring the dependent variables at three or more times during the intervention (Kirk, 1968).

One would then have two general main effect hypotheses that:

H_1: The type of OD intervention technique used will result in differential effects when compared to (1) non-systematic interventions, (2) no intervention and/or (3) each other; and,

H_2: OD interventions will result in differential effects when measured over time.

Dependent Variables

Primary dependent variables should consist of measures of both relevancy and professionalism such as task attraction and test scores, respectively. Additionally, however, the underlying behavioral research on OD would allow the researcher to hypothesize additional effects for group cohesion (Thomas & Fink, 1963), leadership style (Heller & Yukl, 1969), nonverbal communication (Hall, 1966), social attraction (McCroskey & McCain, 1974), as well as other perceptions of the climate of the course (Forehand & Gilmer, 1964). In all cases, each variable would be expected to show differences in the direction of favoring the use of OD methods and the corresponding null hypothesis would predict no differences among treatment groups.

Procedures and Design

College students in the target classes could be randomly assigned to one of the four treatment groups and assigned a semester project designed to promote high levels of interaction between group members. After about two weeks of classwork, an initial pretest of all dependent measures should be taken and repeated each five or so weeks throughout the semester. Meanwhile class activity could proceed as usual but each class group would spend some time with their facilitators as the semester progressed and thereby would receive differential OD treatments as specified by the levels of the first independent variable.

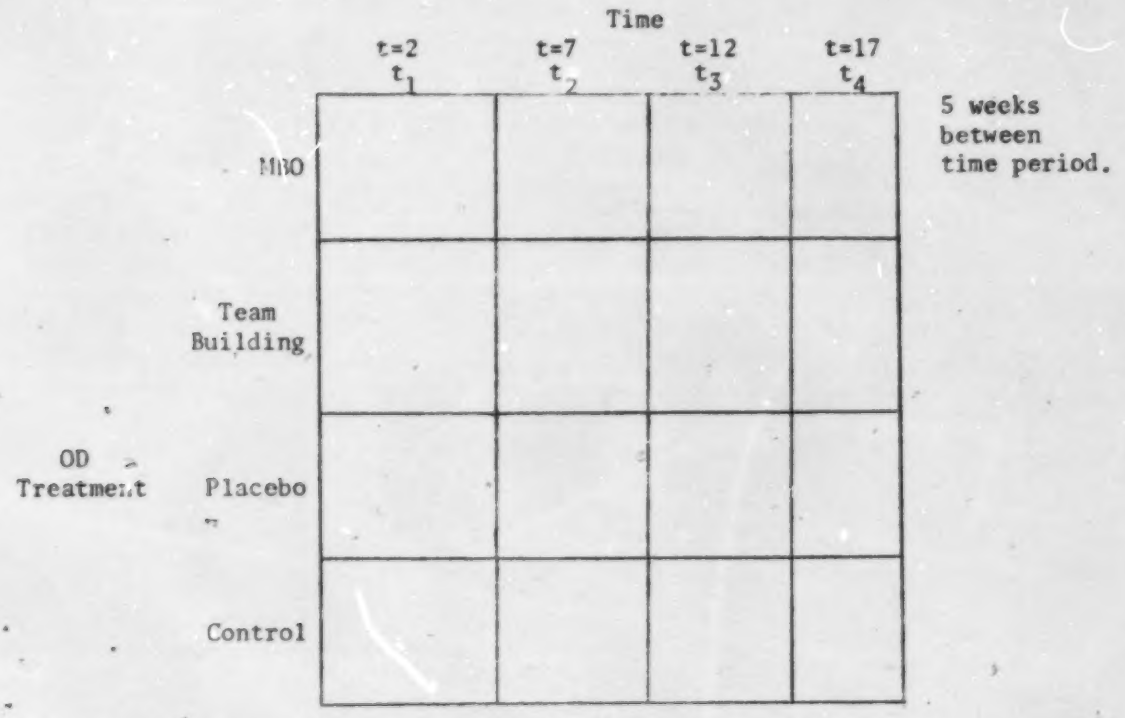
Since this research would be concerned with discovering relationships between both OD interventions and time spans, it can be represented as a two-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) which is, of course, a special case of the general linear model.

Additionally, each factor has four levels such that the resulting

design is 4 x 4 in nature. This is pictorially shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Proposed Split-Plot Research Design



ANOVA is particularly well suited to the questions raised by Friedlander and Brown since it allows the researcher a chance to determine whether OD interventions, on a global level, actually differ in impact, a necessary prerequisite to understanding the mechanisms which made them work. ANOVA can also parcel out the effects of time which is an essential condition inherent in any OD intervention. Of course, ANOVA will quickly allow the researcher to test for the presence of interaction between the variables as well, however, no such interaction need be specifically hypothesized in this research.

Statistical Tests

Being a fixed effect, the OD factor in the design should be subjected to an F-test for significant differences between treatment groups. An error term of pooled variation between subjects within the four levels of the factor would provide an appropriate denominator in testing for the OD main effect.

Similarly, the trend analysis on the time factor should be performed utilizing an error term composed of pooled interaction of the treatment by subjects within groups. Tests could then be conducted for cubic, quadratic and linear trends across time.

The split-plot factorial design is an appropriate mixed-model for studying the simultaneous changes in treatment levels and permits the evaluation of any intervention effects without loss of information which might occur in oneway analyses of variance designs. Precise estimates of the effects over time and the interactions between treatments and time can then be made (Wissmiller, 1977).

Difference between trends can also be considered on a priority basis considering the highest order trend first and stopping whenever significance is reached since lower order trends are not independent of significant higher order findings (Kirk, 1968).

Concluding Remarks

The suggestions made in this report are intended to be taken as innovative in nature. As higher education grows to meet the challenges posed by increasing demands from all sides, we believe both faculty and their students will need to rely on their ability to quickly cope with change processes. It appears that two-way communication channels generated through OD efforts can be a useful and efficient way to aid

this process. We do not mean to imply that two-way communication in the form of an on-going dialog between faculty and students does not generally exist; indeed, it does exist in a variety of forms. Rather, we are concerned with the content of that dialog to the point that we feel students, as clients of the educational system, are important enough for us to consider what they think they need as well. Further, we feel that the generally humanistic values of OD interventions are consistent with the notion of being responsive to student (client) needs. Certainly faculty are also concerned with providing students with "relevant" material, but our feeling is that such relevance is too often limited to the faculty member's own perception of student needs. Failure to use systematic methods of determining student perceptions can put an upper limit on the responsiveness of even the most student-centered instructor.

Finally, even the issue of being responsive to the needs of students introduces noise and confusion to the otherwise busy educational system. As a result, development of the necessary attitudes and behaviors that lead to responsiveness will not be welcomed by everyone. Some may resist it; others may intentionally complicate (cf. Weick, 1976) the process. Our primary concern is to point to some directions for those who already see this trend toward responsiveness, rather than to convince the world that it is needed. Our central emphasis is that being responsive to students as clients requires a different way of conceptualizing the educational experience. The use of OD in the classroom, whether as outlined in the present paper or in any of its several variations, offers the potential for structuring the educational setting to be responsive to the needs of current students.

Footnotes

[1]This paper was originally designed to report the results of an experimental study of the differential effects of MBO and team building in basic management courses at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In this research, 84 undergraduates were randomly assigned to an experimental design similar to that proposed in this section and they were asked to complete tasks as part of their class assignment. Preliminary results run during April, 1976, indicated significant differences between the MBO and placebo treatment groups for task attraction and group satisfaction, as well as for intervention length. These findings, however, were based upon univariate analyses of variance which were subsequently found to contain scoring errors. During the summer of 1976 a further error in coding data occurred which has been deemed to render any additional analysis meaningless. As a result, no data are presented in this report.

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